

Andrew Joseph Caltabiano

By Vera Caltabiano, In Memory of Her Darling Son

FOR YOU MY DARLING SON

The morning of the 28th May 2002 will be forever etched in my memory. It was about 8:10am and I was walking out the door on my way to work. My husband, Joe and I were quickly discussing what we were going to have for tea that night when the phone rang. I was in two minds as to whether I would answer it, as I was already running late. I reluctantly picked up the receiver and my world, as I knew it changed forever.

It was my daughter-in-law Georgina and she could hardly speak, she was sobbing so much. "What's the matter?" I screamed "What happened to Paul (Paul is her husband and my son)."

"It's not Paul," she sobbed "it's Andrew, he's had an accident on his motorbike. "I could tell by the tone of her voice that it must be bad." The ambulance has taken him to the Mater Hospital. I remember screaming, sinking to the floor and dropping the phone. I don't remember much, but I think Joe talked to Georgina briefly.

Our daughter Nancy flew out of bed wondering what had happened and Joe briefly told her what had happened as we made our way to the car to rush up to the hospital.

Have you ever bargained with God? I bargained with God as we sped to the hospital. "Please let him be alright, I promise he will never ride that motorbike again, please don't let anything happen to him. Please take everything I own, but please Dear Lord spare him, please."

At the hospital Joe had to help me through the door as I could not walk properly I was shaking so much. The hospital checked their records and no he was not there he was taken to the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

In the car once more heading for the PA Hospital. I remember gripping the dashboard and the seat so as I would be able to control myself and not scream. We were shown into a waiting room and told to wait. No news. I couldn't sit I couldn't walk I was consumed with uncertainty. "Please God this is a nightmare isn't it? Let me wake up from it." I cried.

All of our family and Andrew's girlfriend Steph arrived. The waiting room was full of people, but still no news. Finally Joe, Steph and I were allowed to see Andrew. I couldn't walk and I can't remember much. I remember kneeling down and begging them to save my baby and I am pretty sure that one of the nurses was crying but Andrew was unconscious.

He was taken to intensive care as he had severe head injuries and severe burns to his legs. Our nightmare became reality. We were not given any guarantee as to whether he would survive or not. I really think they knew but could not bring themselves to tell us.

Because of his burns he was transferred to the Royal Brisbane Hospital the following day. It took them all day to get him ready for the journey, his condition was so dangerous. We nearly lost him on the Thursday night but somehow they managed to pull him through. They were concerned about the swelling of his brain. I was living in a haze and could not even think properly.

On Friday afternoon the swelling of his brain could not be controlled and despite their valiant efforts my beautiful son was pronounced brain dead. His life support had to be turned off. Only parents

who have been there and watched their children die will understand the enormity of what we went through.

The funeral was a haze, something no parent should have to go through. I know I was on autopilot. Your body can take so much grief before it shuts off, I know that now.

How can I describe the inconsolable grief, forlornness and desolation that followed? Only a parent who has lost a child can understand what it's like. I prayed to Andrew to give me the strength to cope with the pain, I wanted so much to join him, I was of no use to anyone here on Earth. How could I live the rest of my life without him? If he wasn't here I shouldn't be also. I didn't realize, until my son John asked me not to do it, but I sat for hours rocking back and forth racked with pain and grief.

My pain was so intense that I had to try and find something to ease it. I tried counselling, faith healing, meditation and anti depressants. I started a journal, writing to my son about my feelings but nothing helped. My niece Marilyn searched the internet and found The Compassionate Friends' website and phoned them. She gave them all the details and they sent me out a package. I read every leaflet from start to finish. No, I wasn't going mad what I was experiencing was normal for a bereaved parent.

I made contact with The Compassionate Friends' drop in centre at New Farm Queensland and spoke with Lorraine. She related her experience as a bereaved parent. She had lost her only child. In the course of conversation she laughed and I can remember thinking, "How can she or anyone laugh when they have lost a child."

I was so sure I would never be able to laugh or find any joy in life again. I soon realized that you cannot go up, over or around grief, you have to work your way through it. You have to actually experience that incredible pain, that overwhelming heartache to get to the other side of the tunnel. I have cried a river of tears and still have my "bad days" but I try and move forward for my son's sake. I now belong to The Compassionate Friends and am slowly trying to help other bereaved parents cope and understand their pain. We are not alone.

I wrote the following article for The Compassionate Friends' Newsletter on the fourth anniversary of losing Andrew.

It's four years since we have lost our precious son Andrew as a result of a motorbike accident and I can truly say it has been a nightmare from which I would like to awaken, but unfortunately cannot.

How do you prepare for such devastation to your life? How do you cope with such a life altering experience? In the beginning the pain was so intense that I prayed to the Dear Lord to let me join my precious son, I was of no use to anyone in this world.

With the help of my dear family especially my sister and my very close friends I tried to pull myself together, even if it was for their sake.

I found solace in The Compassionate Friends, I looked at these lovely people who were more down the track than myself and marvelled at their courage. Would I ever be able to smile again someday?

I made myself do things. It was so hard, it would have been much easier to curl up into a ball and die. I thought if they can do it so can I. They all offered such encouragement. I learnt that it was alright to cry, there are no hard and fast rules with grief as we are all different so grieve differently. They understand that you do not 'get over' losing a child but learn to cope as best you can. They understand that you have bad days and need someone to talk to and they are always there.

I feel that my wound is very slowly healing, but I know that the scar will always be there. When you lose a child whether young or old you lose apart of you that will never return. So if you are in early grief be patient with yourself, it takes a great deal of time to learn to live with your loss. Remember the greater the love, the greater the loss.

It's five and a half years since we lost our Andrew and still there are a lot of things I cannot do. I cannot go to parties, I cannot go on holidays, I cannot smile with my heart, only my lips. The death of a child has a devastating effect on family relationships and it is another thing a grieving parent has to deal with. I now also understand that men and women grieve differently and can understand why my husband Joe could not comfort me in my time of need. He was trying to cope with his own grief. I know that the 'old me' can never be and I believe that I am now more compassionate and understanding. I now also know who my real friends are and they are very precious to me.

We still go to the cemetery every Sunday and spend time there, not to do this would be incomprehensible to us. I am not afraid of dying and look forward to the glorious day when I will be reunited with my beloved son. Till we meet my love you are always in my heart.

6 YEARS ON

Is it really six years since we lost our beloved Andrew? Have I really lived six years without him? How can this be so, how have I managed to get through six years and still not have joined him? The memories, or nightmares of the time of the accident and his subsequent time in hospital, finally succumbing to his injuries will never leave me for as long as I live. I can still "feel" the terrible pain of those early days and thinking surely no mortal can live with such torment.

But here I am after six years, thanks to my dear sister, my wonderful friends at TCF and my other special friends. It has been a long and arduous road, as we all know and it is only time, much time that helps us to rebuild some semblance of life. We know that life as we knew it will never return and there will always be a piece of our heart that is missing, a void never to be filled no matter what.

In the early days I felt and probably was "different" to others around me. I found it extremely difficult to join in any conversation. I did not begrudge others being happy, I just did not want to be a part of it. It has taken a long and painful time, often making myself do things I did not want to do, to get to the stage I am now. Believe me it would have been much easier to curl up in bed and stay there. I'm sure all bereaved parents have felt the same.

TCF is my lifeline I know that I am not alone and if I want to cry it's okay. We all give our hugs freely to one another. Now I don't take life for granted knowing that we can all go at the blink of an eyelid. I am more compassionate, but I do cry easily knowing and having experienced that terrible pain of losing a very, very dear son. I also know that when it's my turn he will be there waiting for me. Till then I will have to live my life as best I can.

Lovingly submitted by Vera Caltabiano, TCF Qld, Mother of Andrew.